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THE WASHINGTON POST
26 April 1982

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...And Talking Down

Sen. Howard Baker has ignored a bipartisan appeal from four senators for a secret Senate session on the Soviet military threat, raising suspicions that the majority leader wants to keep the lid on alarming intelligence that would make it harder to reduce budget deficits by cutting defense spending.

Some defense officials say Baker fears the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) briefing on rising Soviet power would convert fence-sitters—perhaps even some outright opponents—into supporters of President Reagan's defense budget. Instead of welcoming the bid for a secret session, Baker has not even responded to the March 24 letter. Two Republicans, Sens. Paul Laxalt and Steve Symms, and two Democrats, Sens. John Glenn and David Boren, asked him to arrange the unusual closed-door briefing.

That performance casts doubt on the savvy majority leader's current devotion to the Reagan program. In his intense efforts to shape a bipartisan agreement on the budget, Baker has implied that he knows better than the president how much these spending cuts and tax increases should be.

What is unusual is not the closed-door session (there have been many in past years) but the information to which senators would be exposed. Three examples may explain why Baker has not agreed:

1) At their current pace, the Soviets will double the nuclear warheads on their giant SS-18 intercontinental missiles in the next 18 months. This is the counterforce weapon that is the greatest threat to U.S. land-based missiles.

2) The Soviets today have eight different types of submarines under construction at the same time; the United States has two.

3) The Soviets have added slightly over 12 divisions to their army in the

past year, only partly connected with vast new undertakings in Afghanistan. The full reason for the growth is unknown.

The DIA briefing would drive home to all senators these and other details of the Soviet military buildup, scrupulously documented. Its impact would be profound, but the letter from the four senators gathers dust on the desk of the majority leader. He would scarcely welcome the intrusion into the Senate debate of new political and military facts that might hurt the defense-cutting game.

When we asked Baker's aides for an explanation, they answered that an attic hideaway just below the Capitol dome could be made available for DIA briefings. This room, they said, is far more secure against eavesdropping than the Senate chamber. Senators could be briefed there in small groups for as long as necessary.

But that is not at all what is wanted by the four letter-writers and a growing number of other senators ready to join the request for the secret briefing. A closet in the attic would deprive the session of its essential element: the group dynamic of the whole Senate exposed at one time to the shock effect of the DIA briefing. As Glenn wrote his colleagues separately on March 4, "It is vital that every member" of the Senate "hear the evidence."

The suggestion of Baker's aides that the Senate chamber is difficult to make secure has not bothered the Senate before. On four occasions in the last four years, the Senate has closed its doors to hear top-secret information dealing with the Panama Canal, arms sales to the Middle East and other sensitive matters.

Now, with one month of Baker's silence behind them, the four senators have decided to move under Senate rules. They want to force a vote on the issue of a secret session before the defense authorization bill comes to the floor late this week.

Without such a move, the Reagan rearmament is imperiled. The bipartisan budget-makers on Capitol Hill working with White House chief of staff James Baker are not fighters for Reagan's attempt to restore the nation's defenses. Of the 18 lawmakers, only Republican Rep. Trent Lott and Democratic Sen. Fritz Hollings have any claim to defense expertise.

That leaves the defense budget vulnerable to the give-and-take of deficit-shrinking. Defense-cutter James Baker joins arms with defense-cutter Howard Baker in taking money from the military to induce the Democrats into accepting a budget compromise.

The missing ingredient might well be the DIA's facts about the Kremlin war machine. The irony of Washington today is that the president has to hurdle his own majority leader to unveil them.